

CARIBBEAN CONNECTIONS DOMINICANS IN SOUTH FLORIDA KEEP ISLAND NATION'S HERITAGE CLOSE TO THEIR HEARTS

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Ask anyone about their heritage, and they will quickly come up with recollections of food, music, dance, history and contributions to the world from their fellow countrymen.

Eventually, however, they will most likely conclude that what is most important for them is pride in their country of origin or that of their ancestors.

Local residents with roots in the Dominican Republic are no exception. Just ask Noe Rodriguez of Fort Lauderdale who is a student at Broward Community College.

“We’re from the Caribbean, so we share things like our music and our food with Cuba and Puerto Rico,” Rodriguez said. “But most of all, we express our pride.”

“Even though I was born in New York, not the Dominican Republic, I have a good share of pride,” he said. “My parents are from the Dominican Republic and they have shared their heritage with me. It becomes a part of you.”

It’s that kind of nationalistic pride that has led Marilyn Perez of Coconut Creek to begin a dance group for teenagers from her native country who now live in south Florida.

“Merengue is our national dance, it’s our music, our soul,” she said, describing the style of dancing and music that she uses with the group. “It represents our culture and is part of our culture.”

“It is great to be able to express and promote your culture,” she explained. “Dancing offers a visual and expressive way to be proud of our culture.”

Perez’s group has been practicing for shows that they will be presenting during upcoming celebrations of the Dominican Republic’s Independence Day.

The country’s major holiday is celebrated on February 27, and in south Florida, will involve a number of parties, festivals and the launching of a new book, *Patrimonio Dominicano (Dominican Heritage)* by Architect Cesar Ivan Feris who will travel to Miami for a ceremony on February 24.

The 2000 census showed that there were 10,498 people of Dominican heritage in Broward County, up from 3,489 in 1990, 36,454 in Miami-Dade, up from 23,475 a decade ago and 3,649 in Palm Beach County, an increase from 1,155 in 1990.

Perez said that it is not always easy to be a Dominican in the United States, but most immigrants do well here. “It’s a different culture, but there is a lot of American influence in the Dominican Republic going back to the early invasions,” she reported.

She described her fellow Dominicans as “nice people and hospitable and easy to get along with.”

Perez said that her dance group uses several different instruments when they dance, including a Tambora, a special type of drum from her homeland, and a Guira, an instrument that she describes as looking like a “cheese grater.”

“It has holes in it and you take a fork and scrape it against the instrument to make the sound,” she explained.

While Perez expresses her cultural background through music and dance, Rodriquez uses art. “I do it most for my own benefit,” he explains, though he has had some of his works displayed in galleries.

“We have a very artistic culture,” he said. “However, many of our artists aren’t well-known outside of our country. They are mostly popular local artists, but they are really good.”

“They like to paint both surreal and realistic pieces,” he said. “I like to draw, paint and do sculptures.”

Rodriquez said that many members of his family have been artists, including his parents and his grandparents.

While enjoying art and his heritage, Rodriquez said that he does not limit his social contacts just to other Dominicans. “My friends are from many different backgrounds,” he said.

However, like other Dominicans, he confessed to sharing the same passion for baseball as many other Dominicans. “I get together with my friends and cousins to play baseball a lot.”

Writing and poetry are important to Miramar resident Lily Guzman. “I have been involved in the promotion of Dominican poetry,” she said, adding that she developed an early interest in that area by reading poems on the radio in the Dominican Republic when she was three years old.

She wrote her first poem when she was six, and won a trip to Spain when she was 15 for writing an essay.

“I have also contributed poetry to several books and have had some published in newspapers,” she said.

Saying that she likes to write on moral issues, Guzman said, “I still write. I have had some stories published here in magazines.”

Dominican Claudina Estrada of Weston enjoys sharing her culture with others. “I promoted the first art exhibition in our Latin women’s cultural group *Mujeres Latinas Impulsando Mujeres Latinas*,” she said.

Estrada said that the group works to empower Latin women, to help women and their families integrate into society and to provide health, educational and cultural opportunities.

Explaining that she is the only Dominican member of the group, she said that she has enjoyed offering examples of food and handcrafts from her country.

“We have a program called *Travel around Latin America* two or three times a year,” she said. “We will focus on one or two countries and will present videos and invite representatives of a country’s tourist office to be present.”

Dominicans point with pride to other contributions that their fellow-citizens have provided to the world.

“Many people come by our store to buy unusual medicines from the Dominican Republic,” said Luis Tisa of Pembroke Pines who operates the Santo Dominican Mini Market in Hollywood.

Tisa said that Dominicans have been innovative in developing natural remedies and people from other nationalities have picked up on those resources.

“A lot of people buy Brochochen which is very popular for helping with colds,” he explained.

“We have a sense of our own culture,” concluded Perez. “We want to share it with others, but also teach our children about it to remind them where they came from.”

EVENTS:

Softball tournament, Saturday, Sunday, February 21 and 22 at Juan Pablo Duarte Park, 2800 NW 17th Avenue, Miami.

Launching of book, *Patrimonio Dominicano (Dominican Heritage)* by Architect Cesar Ivan Feris, 7 p.m., Tuesday, February 24 at Hyatt Regency Hotel, 400 SE Second Avenue Miami. By invitation only, contact the Dominican Consulate at 305-358-3220 for more information

Conference on Dominican Tourism, Wednesday, February 25 at Hyatt Regency Hotel, 400 SE Second Avenue Miami.

Folkloric Painting Workshop, Thursday, February 26 at Juan Pablo Duarte Park, 2800 NW 17th Avenue, Miami.

Dominical Cultural Celebration, Friday, February 27 at Dade County Auditorium, 2901 West Flagler Street, Miami. Featuring musical and dance groups, including Toros Band.

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